

# IT'S NOT JUST CHINA NEW YORK IS GATEWAY FOR ILLEGAL IVORY

DAN STILES



first came to Kenya in 1971 to assist on the Koobi Fora paleoanthropology project at Lake Turkana. He taught at the University of Nairobi

from 1977-1981 then worked for UNEP and other UN agencies for several years. He has researched extensively in Africa and Asia on forest and drylands natural resource utilisation. Since 1999, he has been carrying out ivory trade studies and he just completed an assignment with UNEP to help prepare the Stolen Apes report, along with another one on the elephant crisis, both launched at CITES 16 in Bangkok.

In SWARA 2008:2, Esmond Martin and I reported on a large-scale ivory survey that we had carried out in the USA in 2006-2007<sup>1</sup>. We found that the USA had the second largest ivory market in the world, and that New York City had by far the most ivory seen for sale of the 16 urban areas surveyed.

I visited New York City in April this year and re-surveyed the eight outlets that had displayed the most ivory for sale in 2007. Since our first survey was made (carried out by E. Martin), the state of New York has introduced a law that requires all dealers in elephant ivory to obtain a license. As of the end of 2012, 60 dealers had obtained ivory dealing licenses.

Three of the outlets in 2007 were multi-storied markets that contained a



A typical display of the type of shop in New York that sells what is almost certainly illegal ivory. Note the mixture of elephant and mammoth ivory and large bone Chinese warrior.

PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

total of 332 shops selling antiques and art. Of these, 50 displayed 1,237 ivory items. The type of ivory pieces appeared to be genuinely old and therefore mostly or entirely legal ivory. In April 2013 one of these markets had closed and the other two now had only about 20 outlets selling fewer than 600 ivory items.

In a little over five years there has been a 60% decrease in the number of outlets selling ivory, and an approximately 50% decrease in the number of ivory items seen for sale. In

addition, more than half of the outlets selling ivory were not licensed to do so.

The five individual antiques or home decoration shops with the most ivory in Manhattan displayed a total of 6,681 ivory items in 2007 (more than the total of 96 shops selling ivory in Beijing and Shanghai combined in a 2002 survey!). The shop with the most ivory was no longer in existence in 2013, and the four remaining now only had a total of about 1,000 ivory pieces. One of these, a Chinese-owned shop, had gone

<sup>1</sup>Ivory Markets in the USA, which can be found at <http://www.savetheelephants.org/publications.html>.



PHOTOS BY: DAN STILES



**Top Left:** The similar style shop in San Francisco that sells illegal ivory, mixing it with mammoth and bone.

**Bottom Left:** Recently made fake Art Deco statuettes in New York.

**Top Right:** A San Francisco ersatz Art Deco piece.

vases and ornaments, ... Art Deco style human statuettes almost all with ivory faces and hands, Chinese ivory figurines or netsukes, and occasionally large ivory pagodas or scenic pieces with trees. Some of the small ivory ornaments were displayed in the shop windows. All these shops displayed signs advertising 'major sale' or 'huge discount' with reasons ... such as 'going out of business', ... 'lease coming to an end' or 'major renovations taking place'. Prices are usually reduced by 50-90% in order to attract customers.'

To this description I would add, they always display a mixed assembly of elephant and mammoth ivory pieces, and large pieces made of composite bone. I suspect that these pieces are imported together from China and/ or Hong Kong, which allows the illegal elephant ivory to be smuggled in along with the mammoth ivory and imitation ivory bone pieces. The Art Deco style

from 850 elephant ivory items in 2007 to about 35! Almost all of the ivory displayed in this outlet (~150 pieces) was hippo ivory. None of the four outlets were licensed to sell ivory.

***If these eight outlets are representative of the general ivory market in New York City, there has been a massive decline in scale in a little over five years.***

And this decline took place at exactly the same time as the CITES auction of 108 tonnes of ivory from southern Africa to China and Japan and its aftermath. According to anti-legal ivory trade activists, these sales stimulated

ivory demand and were a primary cause of the current elephant poaching crisis. The evidence from New York appears to contradict this claim.

Even though the decline in ivory market scale is encouraging, I found a very troubling aspect concerning a particular type of outlet that sells ivory. There are several shops in New York that follow exactly the same pattern. As described in the 2008 report, 'They were usually in old buildings ... and usually congested. They sell pseudo-European reproduction furniture - much of it heavily gilded - modern human full-size statues, glass or China



PHOTOS BY: ABC NIGHTLINE



**Top:** In 2012 the USFWS and New York state authorities collaborated in seizing more than USD 2 million worth of ivory in two New York City shops.

**Below:** These tusks seized by the USFWS are a small part of the ivory stored in their facility and indicate that ivory demand is still a problem in the USA.

‘Chiparus’ statuettes are fakes, starting at USD 30,000, but can be bought for less than USD 1,000 with bargaining.

There are about a dozen of this type of outlet in New York, which targets tourists. They have a relatively high turnover and salespeople stated that they sell a lot of ivory. They are always ‘going out of business’, yet their ivory displays are always full. The salespeople said that two to three years ago Chinese citizens came to New York in large numbers and would buy every ivory

piece in the shop, but that had now stopped. If Chinese had cleaned out the ivory, where did the replacement ivory now on display come from?

I saw exactly the same style of shop in San Francisco in 2007. There were about 10 of them scattered around the Fisherman’s Wharf area, which is always crowded with tourists. Even the salespeople were very similar in both cities, always fast-talking men with New York, eastern European or Israeli accents. I would not be surprised if the same company owned them all. They claim that they are selling objects obtained from estate auctions, but the uniformity of garish style, and the impossibly large number of ‘Chiparus’ Art Deco figurines, in the outlets argues against that possibility.

New York and San Francisco appear to be gateway cities for illegal ivory import in the USA. The US Fish and Wildlife Service and the New York and California wildlife services have begun cracking down on illegal ivory sales in recent years, and some important arrests involving large quantities of ivory have been made. I hope that they will investigate the shops described here and take appropriate action to stop their illegal ivory dealing. China is not the only culprit promoting elephant poaching through its illegal ivory markets. The USA is right there with them. ●